THE GIFT OF COMMUNICATION

June 7, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 11:1-9
Acts 2:1-13

"And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" -Acts 2:8 (NRSV)

Pentecost - the birth date of the Church - the gift of God's spirit to the disciples and their response...

The story of Pentecost is, to say the very least, strange - "a sound like the rush of a mighty wind... tongues of fire... men and women speaking simultaneously in different languages." It doesn't sound like church to me, at least a Presbyterian Church, which is a perfect lead-in to the story I tell at least annually, ordinarily on this occasion, about the fervent Pentecostal worshiper who wandered into a traditional Presbyterian Church on Sunday morning where divine worship was proceeding decently and in order. When the minister began to preach the woman livened up, began to get into it, began to respond with vocal and increasingly audible "Amens" - "Praise the Lord." The people in front of her became uncomfortable, turning around to look. Finally an usher approached her and said, "Mam, is there something wrong?" "Why no," she said, "I've got the spirit." And the usher, a bit non-plussed, stiffened and said, "Well, you didn't get it here."

Which, come to think of it, was not unlike what the urbane bystanders said in Jerusalem when the friends of Jesus experienced, on the Day of Pentecost, a new sense of God's presence, a new understanding of God's power and the meaning of their own lives, and a new sense or urgency about the future. "They are drunk," said the urbane sophisticate at this unseemly display of religious enthusiasm.

James Forbes, preaching minister of Riverside Church, New York, was invited to deliver the Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University a few years ago, which Yale likes to describe as "the most prestigious preaching event in the United States." Forbes, who preached here last January and is recognized as one of our very best, came out of the Pentecostal Church and still appreciates how it formd him. His lectures were titled, "The Holy Spirit and Preaching," - enough to scare off a lot of people.

We avoid Holy Spirit talk, Forbes observes, because we do not want to seem unsophisticated. Even to use "spirit" language is to seem somehow to be irrational... Nor, he says, do we want to have anything to do with a power we cannot ultimately control. The result is that we are intellectual deists and practical atheists. Our God is an academic hypothesis... Human history, our lives, go on under their own power, we think, untouched, unaffected by power or love or grace beyond ourselves. That's what atheism is, of course... believing nothing... or believing something that doesn't make any difference. Religion which tries to celebrate God the hypothesis, instead of God the spirit, God the power, is bound to be fairly dry business.

And so, even while we are repelled by Holy Spirit talk we are, in a way, fascinated. Spirituality is arguably the hottest religious subject currently. Books on prayer and meditation are bestsellers and some say that the whole New Age religion phenomenon with its emphasis on extra sensory experience, transcendental meditation... is evidence that traditional religion has forgotten something very important.

But "Holy Spirit" continues to make us uncomfortable. And our first problem is with this account. It sounds more like what happens at Chicago Stadium as the Chicago Bulls are introduced and the lights go down, the laser spots are flashing, the place fills with fireworks, smoke, and literally erupts in a volcano of noise and spirit. Did you ever try to describe that to someone who has never been there? It can't be done, which is exactly the problem Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostle, encountered when he tried to record it.

The Biblical context is the time after Easter. The friends of Jesus believe he is alive, not dead. There has been a resurrection. The man who wrote this account was Luke, and he closed his first volume, the Gospel According to Luke, with an account of two disciples on the road to Emmaeus and Jesus comes to them on the road, and is known to them in the breaking of bread. Now what? What to do next?

They waited in Jerusalem and Luke reports that on the Day of Pentecost something happened that convinced the friends of Jesus that God's commitment to the world was absolute, that God's spirit was an energy they could rely on, that God's power was dependable. And one thing more, one very important thing, God's gift to them was the ability to speak and hear and understand in a new way - the gift of communication.

We often get it wrong on Pentecost. What happened this day was not an experience of unintelligible babble - what some call "speaking in tongues" - but the very opposite. Men and women spoke in languages which were intelligible to a carefully described multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic crowd of

people. The Pentecostal gift, that is to say, is not peculiarity, idiosyncrasy, religious oddity, but communication, intelligibility, understanding. Quite simply, there is no more urgent topic than that.

Think of the time and energy and money we invest in the art of communication. We read about it; we attend seminars on developing communication skills; we hire consultants to teach people in our business to communicate; we retain agencies to sensitize us to the many ways we communicate as a university, a hospital, a corporation, a government, with our multiple markets or publics. And in our most personal relationships we know that viability, energy, passion and joy, intimacy - depend entirely on communication.

Hugh T. Kerr, editor of Theology Today wrote an essay, "Whatever Happened to Dialogue," which noted the irony that we are investing enormously in learning how to communicate while simultaneously failing to do it much. It is fashionable on campus these days simply to shout down somebody with whom you disagree... ethnic groups remain isolated in racial enclaves, eating together, rooming together, not talking much to anyone outside.

"Our current failure to communicate," he says, "is not a problem of media or technique. Our problem is that so many of us don't want to communicate - partly because we have nothing to say to each other, and partly because everybody seems to be mad at everybody else."

It is not simple. Couples who want to get along better or develop a stronger relationship always know that the key is communication and they know something else usually, namely that it isn't automatic, or simple, or easy; that there is a sense that the longer you know someone, the more of a challenge communication becomes. Or perhaps more accurately, the longer you know someone the easier it is not to communicate, to quit trying, to give up, and to live in isolated silence, in separation, alienation - all of which are good synonyms for "hell."

Might the Church of Jesus Christ have something to contribute to the conversation about communication? I think so. For one thing here, on Pentecost - this occasion of the Church's birth - we experience the truth that communication is more than hearing, more than merely speaking words at one another. In fact, we ought to know that language is so powerful that it can divide as well as bring together, destroy as well as heal. If you have ever been the object of a racial slur, or if you have ever used one, the ugliest words in our vocabulary - "dago, wop, hunkey, kike, polak, spic, nigger..." - you know how painful and distancing language can be. The story of the Tower of Babel is an ancient way to describe the fractious, divided nature of the human race. Once speaking one language, the human enterprise is divided by language, scattered over the face of the earth.

Pentecost is healing: the coming together in mutuality, community of what has been divided; the reunion and the miracle - the gift is communication.

Words are powerful. One of the first things I read every Sunday is William Safire's column in the New York Times Magazine on language and inevitably I learn something about the mystery and magic of human language and its power not only to reflect but to shape human experience. Robert MacNeil of the "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour," wrote a bestseller, Wordstruck in which he chronicles his reverence for the power of language. "Spoken words," he observes, "carry a stronger current to the emotions than the printed word. Speak to me and you will move me; write to me and I'll have to think about it." [p. 127]

I spent the last few days of the week attending the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Milwaukee and was struck again with the truth that much talking is not necessarily synonymous with much communicating and that speaking can divide, that words are weapons we use on each other. In the matter of abortion, for instance, I was struck again that people who disagree on what is responsible and moral are not always interested in communicating, but often in winning, defeating, arguing down an opponent who begins to feel like an enemy.

Pentecost is a reminder that energy needs to be invested not only in speaking but in listening if the goal is communication... that you have to want to - stronger still, will to - understand a person with whom you disagree. It's true globally - at the Earth Summit in Rio where people from radically different cultures, economies, life-styles, and stages of development are, according to one news report, struggling to find a new vocabulary with which to communicate with one another. And it is abundantly and profoundly true in the arena of your intimate and personal relationships. Communication happens only when the hearer wills it, wants it, works at hearing, listening and understanding. Sometimes it's called "active listening." The sense of it is simply that communication will never happen until both parties will it to happen. And then a miracle - you cannot prevent it from happening.

Communication is always a gift, that is to say. Communication always is a result of community, communion... which is why the most appropriate way to celebrate Pentecost is not by ranting and raving (see Forbes) about the Spirit, but by sitting down at table together.

For there, at table, eating and drinking together, we are engaging in the oldest human ritual of all, communion - breaking bread together, expressing and creating community.

How, finally, does anyone of us know God, experience communion with God, understand God? We are not very good at talking about it actually, It always comes out wrong. We know God

because God has spoken and the word God spoke to us was Jesus Christ... Furthermore, God has done something to keep the conversation going, has given us the spirit whose power is the gift of communication.

We know God because God is fully invested in the art of communion with us. What we know and understand of God, our very best thinkers have always perceived, is because God wills it, wants it, gives it. Our faith, the theologians have always taught, is not something we invent, or create, or achieve. Our faith is fully itself, a gift of God.

Jim Forbes put it in a lovely paragraph:

> "In each of us there is a unique unfolding of God-consciousness that defies analysis because it is safe-guarded... within the heart of God." [The Holy Spirit and Preaching, p. 30]

And before him, Paul Tillich, philosopher, theologian, so brilliantly esoteric that his name is synonymous with difficult, complex thinking, said on this topic, something very simple:

> "The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice: The Spirit can work in you, awakening the desire to strive toward the sublime over against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you courage which says 'yes' to life in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced..." [Forbes, Ibid, p. 74]

This modest meal stands for the most profound idea: that God, Creator of all, Lord of the universe, is committed to us, wills to be in communion with us, and that together - in community - we know and experience the presence and power of our God.

So let us come to receive the gift. Let us come to table gratefully, in communion with one another. It is the Spirit of God that bids us.

> "The lone, wild bird in lofty flight
> Is still with Thee, nor leaves Thy sight.
> And I am Thine! I rest in Thee.
> Great Spirit, come, and rest in me."